

MERCER STREET



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Phyllis C. Stoolmacher
Director

September 28, 2005

Secretary of Agriculture
Mike Johanns
Farm Bill
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250-3355

Dear Secretary Mike Johanns:

I appreciate the opportunity to offer suggestions on USDA programs that will be reauthorized as part of the 2007 Farm Bill. My comments will be restricted to the three USDA programs that my organization, Mercer Street Friends Food Cooperative, participates: the Food stamp program, The Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program.

We currently receive USDA Food Stamp Participation Grant funding which has allowed our organization to hire a part-time, bilingual community food stamp outreach worker. Our food stamp outreach worker conducts food stamp screening at 35 community sites: WIC Clinics, Nutrition Projects for the Elderly Centers, low-income housing sites, emergency food pantries, and social service agencies.

This project has been extremely successful this past year with over 200 clients being referred to the Mercer County Food Stamp office to initiate a food stamp application. Funding for this position will be exhausted by June 2006. Our organization would like to continue to provide this service to the 60 member agencies of our food bank and low-income families in our community. States should assist the food stamp outreach efforts of nonprofits and USDA funds should be made available to support this effort. Many eligible people do not participate in the program because they do not know they are eligible. Administrative guidelines regarding food stamp outreach should encourage states to help fund food stamp outreach efforts by nonprofits in their state.

Another feature of the food stamp program which should be altered is the base monthly food stamp benefit level. Food stamp benefit levels should be based on a food plan that accurately reflects what it costs to provide a family with a nutritionally adequate diet. The benefit formula should be revised to allow families to set aside more of their income for rent, utilities, child care and health costs, which have risen significantly since the program was established. All aspects of the benefit structure must keep pace with inflation.

Currently, benefit levels are based on the Thrifty Food Plan, an estimate of what it would cost for a family of four to purchase a month's worth of food, representing a minimally adequate diet. When the plan was first developed during the Depression, the federal government described it as inadequate for long-term consumption.

Studies since have shown that these initial food cost assumptions are incorrect for most low-income people.

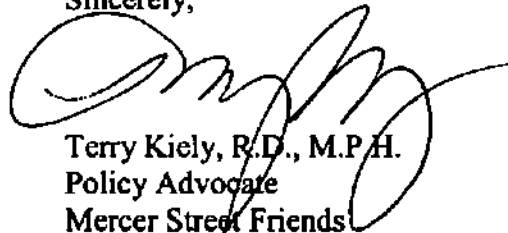
The maximum monthly food stamp benefit in 2004 for a family of four is \$471 or \$1.31 per person per meal. Most participants do not receive the maximum benefit because the program assumes that households can contribute one-third of their income toward food purchases. The average per-person monthly benefit is \$84 or 93 cents per meal. Some households only receive the minimum monthly benefit of \$10.

Our organization participates in The Emergency Food Assistance Program by distributing USDA commodities to emergency pantries, shelters and soup kitchens in Mercer County. This program plays an important role in responding to families' needs, particularly in emergency situations. The federal government can do more to support charitable organizations that supplement the core federal food assistance programs. Both TEFAP and CSFP are effective programs that should be expanded. TEFAP needs more funding for commodities and program administration. Moreover, federal tax law should provide additional incentives to encourage charitable food donations to food banks and pantries.

For the past four years, Mercer Street Friends has worked with the Mercer County Office on Aging conducting outreach to eligible low-income seniors for the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program in Mercer County. This program helps to improve the nutritional quality of low-income seniors' diets as well as providing financial support to small local farmers in New Jersey. This program improves the nutritional quality of low-income seniors' diets and provides federal funding for small local family farmers. Unfortunately, this program is funded at a level that only allows 5% of the 500,000 seniors eligible for the program in our state to participate. The funding for this program should be expanded in the future Farm Bill.

I appreciate getting the chance to provide recommendations regarding improvements to USDA programs which will be part of the 2007 Farm Bill. I hope that these programs will be expanded and improved to better serve the low-income families which depend on these programs to sustain their health and their children's health. These programs provide food and nutrition to families that do not have any other financial means to prepare a meal each day for their children and themselves.

Sincerely,



Terry Kiely, R.D., M.P.H.
Policy Advocate
Mercer Street Friends



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